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NOTES AND DISCUSSION.

THE RELIGION OF THE SEMITES.

Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. First Series. The Fundamental Institutions.

By Professor ROBERTSON SMITH, 1889.

This is a most interesting and valuable book. When Professor Robertson Smith's series of lectures are concluded, they will form the standard work upon their subject, except in so far as Babylonian and Assyrian religions, purposely excluded from the book, are concerned. There is, indeed, no other book, so far as I am aware, in which even the fundamental institutions of the Semitic religions are treated so fully and completely as in the volume before us. If the other portions of the series come up to the level of this first part, the new Professor of Arabic in the University of Cambridge will have undoubtedly conferred upon all students of religion a very considerable boon. It is not within my power to criticise this book. I should like, however, to point out its great importance and suggestiveness for readers of the Old Testament. From the Bible, and especially from the Pentateuch, a large number of illustrations are taken, but these receive a new light from the parallel passages, dealing mainly with the religious customs of Arabia, with which they are co-ordinated, and the general theories which they are used to substantiate.

The titles of the lectures sufficiently explain their subjects. It is the fundamental institutions of the Semitic religions with which Professor Robertson Smith deals. To that most fundamental of them all, to the institution of sacrifice, six out of eleven lectures are devoted. Nearly related and leading up to sacrifice, is the investigation into sanctuaries, altars and holy places. The relation of the gods to man and to outward objects, as well as their own nature so far as they affect the character of the institutions, are also dealt with in the second and third lectures. The whole plan of the book is better understood after it has been read a second time. As in a good novel one cannot appreciate the working out of the plot till one has reached the *dénouement*, so in Professor R. Smith's book, one does not adequately see what the choice of material and the manner of presentation in the earlier lectures are leading up to, till one reads these lectures again after one has first finished the whole.

The "fundamental institutions" examined in this book, and especially the rite of sacrifice, are, it will be found, to a considerable extent reviewed and explained by the help of two theories. But these theories are themselves facts, so that perhaps it would be more correct to say that the phenomena of the institutions are largely grouped under or developed out of two "fundamental" facts, the origin of which precedes in time the earliest religious traditions which have come down to us. These two facts are Totemism and Taboo. It will be found that a

variety of Biblical customs, and a number of laws, representing the final written precipitate of immemorial usage in the Levitical Code, must be brought back for their complete explanation to Totemism and Taboo.

Totemism is now-a-days sufficiently known to need no definition. "In the Totem stage of society, each kinship or stock of savages believes itself to be physically akin to some natural kind of animate or inanimate things, most generally to some kind of animal" (p. 117). This belief does not imply that other animals (and other objects, such as trees or fountains) may not also be thought to be either themselves divine, or the seat of spirits and demons, but merely that the Totem, that is the animal kin, is the sacred and divine ancestor of that particular stock. The Totem, moreover, is friendly to his kin, and so the tribal god, in whom the Totem culminates, or out of whom he grows, is essentially the friendly protector of the tribe, just as he comes to be regarded as its father and king. For Professor R. Smith is keen to deny the truth of Statius's well-known adage, *Primus in orbi deos fecit timor*. The attempt to appease "invincible or mysterious enemies of more than human power" is not the origin of religion. "From the earliest times religion, as distinct from magic or sorcery, addresses itself to kindred and friendly beings, who may indeed be angry with their people for a time, but are always placable except to the enemies of their worshippers and to renegade members of the community" ¹ (p. 55). In the light of Totemism, we can now explain a portion of certain facts in old Israelitish life. Some animals are not eaten at all; some are eaten in the ordinary way in which we eat animal food to-day (*e.g.* game, "the roebuck and the hart" of Deuteronomy); some are only eaten on solemn occasions, after or as a sacrifice. These last are the domestic animals, the ox, the sheep, and the goat. Why are oxen sacrificed and not gazelles? Professor R. Smith marshals a variety of evidence to show that in the earliest pastoral ages the domestic animals were sacred beings, regarded "on the one hand as friends and kinsmen of men, and on the other hand as of a nature akin to the gods" (p. 278). (Totemism can survive together with the higher belief in deities that are independent of, though akin to, their animal representations.) That is the ultimate reason why "the idolatrous Israelites worshipped Jehovah under the form of a steer" (p. 291). But if to the ancestors of the Hebrews the domestic animals were originally sacred and kin, why did they in their sacrifices slaughter their own kinsfolk? Professor R. Smith's theory of sacrifice is an answer to this question. But first of all, the very fact that the gazelle is eaten casually by any individual, whereas the domestic animals are only eaten socially, and after sacrificial rites, shows that they must have been regarded as essentially more sacred than game. (This social, communal element of sacrifice and antique religion generally is admirably brought out, explained and commented upon by our author (pp. 236-250). A number of Biblical passages illustrate the thesis, and are in their turn freshly illumined by it. Compare especially 1 Sam. i. 3, 21; ix. 12; xx. 6, 29). Now sacrifice itself is not originally a tribute or gift to the god. These ideas are secondary (p. 328), and come up only when the old ideas have become partly unintelligible. Sacrifice is essentially a communion between the kindred god and his worshippers. Both parties were supposed to meet "together from time to time to seal and strengthen their fellowship, and to nourish their common life by a

¹ That is why Amos iii. 2 is such a *bouleversement* of the whole theory of ancient religion.

common meal, to which those outside the clan were not invited" (p. 257). It was natural that if any temporary estrangement was imagined to have occurred between the god and his human kin, the common meal was all the more useful. Thus the original sacrifices could branch off into the sacrifice of mere festivity on the one hand, and the atonement sacrifices on the other. The animal used in sacrifice is even more akin to the god than are the worshippers themselves, and for that very reason he is more fitted than a man to be the means of re-establishing or confirming the bond between the god and the clan (p. 342), and thus Professor R. Smith holds for this and other reasons that "human sacrifice is not more ancient than the sacrifice of sacred animals, and that the prevalent belief of ancient heathenism that animal victims are an imperfect substitute for a human life arose by a false inference from traditional forms of ritual that had ceased to be understood" (p. 346, and for the false inference itself compare Genesis xxii., and pp. 291, 343, and 446). But the destruction of kin life, whether in animal or man, was a very solemn thing, and only permissible as an act of the community and not of the individual, and that is why executions (outside the range of blood revenge, "which applies to manslaughter, *i.e.*, to the killing of a stranger") "constantly assume sacrificial forms, for the tribesman's life is sacred even if he be a criminal, and he must not be killed in a common way" (pp. 351, 398, and 399. This elucidates Numbers xxv. 4, and other Biblical passages quoted in these pages). Professor R. Smith explains in detail the character of the most ancient sacrificial meals, and points out survivals of these antique usages in many Biblical customs. The oldest sacrifice involves no burning, and indeed no altar-hearth. Thus in 1 Sam. xiv. 32-35, the altar which Saul is said to have built in verse 35 is really identical with the stone which he caused to be rolled unto him in verse 33, and "the simple shedding of the blood by the stone or altar consecrated the slaughter, and made it a legitimate sacrifice" (p. 185).¹ The blood, as the seat of the life, is the most sacred part of the animal, and thus it came to be generally regarded as too sacred to be drunk, and was wholly made over to the god. But an outward reception of the blood was still occasionally retained upon solemn occasions, and this explains why in Exodus xxiv. 8, Moses sprinkles the blood of the covenant sacrifice half upon the altar, and half upon the people, why the priests are consecrated with blood (Lev. viii. 23), why the leper is purified with blood (Lev. xiv. 7), and why the altar upon the Day of Atonement is cleansed by blood (pp. 301, 325, 326, and 389). Scarcely less sacred than the blood as a seat of life are "the viscera, especially the kidneys and the liver, which in the Semitic dialects are continually named as the seats of emotion, or more broadly, the fat of the omentum, and the organs that lie in and near it" (p. 360). This is why the fat is forbidden in the Levitical legislation as an article of food, and in sacrifices is burned upon the altar (Lev. iii. 15-17; vii. 23-25). The further idea that "the thigh is a seat of life, and especially of procreative power" sufficiently explains the old Israelitish superstition mentioned in Genesis xxxii. 32, which, though not elevated into a law by the authors of the Pentateuchal codes, was, nevertheless, unfortunately not neglected by post-Biblical legislators (p. 360, note 2).

The student must read in the lectures themselves how the original

¹ The sacred stone is the symbol of the deity "set up in a place already consecrated by tokens of the divine presence," p. 189, (in Saul's case by his victory over the Philistines, p. 108), and at an earlier stage the symbol of the god may be also his abode (Genesis xxviii. 22, p. 181).

type of sacrifice changes its character, and develops, on the one hand, into the "honorific" or tributary, on the other, into the "piacular" and exceptional form of it, with either of which the reader of the Bible is quite familiar. How, too, in the priestly legislation, old and new ideas are linked together unconsciously, he will there find frequently shown.

The idea of Taboo, which, as I have already said, is largely used by the professor to explain many a Semitic "institution," is partly connected with that awful and mysterious aspect of life, out of which, as we saw, religion, as distinct from magic and sorcery, was not evolved. Taboo is defined as "a system of restrictions on man's arbitrary use of natural things, enforced by the dread of supernatural penalties." When these natural things are connected with the friendly deities of the clan, they become rules of holiness, but if they are connected with the innumerable mysterious agencies and evil spirits that lie, as it were, outside the communal religion, the Taboos become, in the Semitic religions, rules of uncleanness. The two kinds of Taboo are, however, often confused together (p. 142).

A remarkable number of laws in the Pentateuch are traceable to Taboo, of which, as our author points out, the second type, which underlies rules of uncleanness, is far lower than the first type, which constitutes the basis of holiness (p. 143). Thus it becomes clear that the principle of forbidden foods is at bottom nothing but Taboo. So are the laws connected with the purification of women after childbirth, with their uncleanness during menstruation, with leprosy, and the especially minute regulations concerning the uncleanness caused by the carcasses of "creeping things," or vermin (Lev. xi. 32). The last illustration is further substantiated by the evidence the Bible affords of idolatrous worship of and sacrifice to vermin (Isaiah lxvi. 17; Ezekiel viii. 10). For when in exceptional cases, and as a powerful piaculum, an unclean animal is sacrificed, it is also a sacred animal, which is ordinarily invested with a rigid Taboo (pp. 275, 276, and 388. Compare the author's earlier work, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, pp. 304-310, a book which has frequently to be referred to in reading the lectures).

Of Taboos that belong to the higher type, there are also several Biblical examples. Taboo, for instance, explains why, according to the oldest laws, the firstlings of domestic cattle, which cannot be sacrificed, must, if not redeemed, be killed, and why the first three years' produce of fruit trees was forbidden for use (pp. 431 and 149). Again, holiness is contagious, and thus creates new Taboos. That is why shoes must be put off before holy ground is trodden, otherwise they could not be worn again, or why consecrated or "banned" things affect with their Taboo whatever they come near (pp. 434 and 435). It is a deduction from this principle that caused the use of holy objects as materials for ordeals. Even of this curious superstition the Levitical legislation contains a most interesting example. It is the use of the "holy water" in the trial of a woman suspected of adultery, a form of ordeal to which, as is shown in the work before us, there is many an ancient parallel (p. 164).

I trust I have said enough of Professor R. Smith's book to show how useful and valuable it is for all Biblical students. I have by no means exhausted the variety of Biblical topics with which it deals, nor have I even alluded to the wealth of material, mainly drawn from Arabic sources, outside the Bible which it brings together. Jewish students will, it is to be hoped, not neglect these lectures, though it is, I admit, only those students whose Judaism has nothing to fear from such

enquiries upon the field of comparative religion, who will read the book without a shade of discomfort or regret. For no one can read it without being convinced that there are incorporated in the Pentateuchal legislation (mainly in its latest priestly code), a variety of ordinances, which are merely traditional survivals from a past heathenism, put forward, when their origin was wholly forgotten, as the fresh and perfect word of God. (Orthodox Christianity has to encounter similar or still more fundamental difficulties, to which Professor R. Smith appears occasionally to allude.) Is not our author, *e.g.*, in the right when he says, "The irrationality of laws of uncleanness, from the standpoint of spiritual religion, or even of the higher heathenism, is so manifest that they must necessarily be looked on as having survived from an earlier form of faith and society" ? (p. 430). The writer of Psalm l., as Professor R. Smith points out (p. 373), scornfully rebukes a popular theory of sacrifice current in his day, which is still indicated to us by a phrase in Leviticus (iii. 11). Is it "orthodox" or "reformed" Judaism which is working upon the Psalmist's lines ?

C. G. MONTEFIORE.

THE FABLES OF ÆSOP.

The Fables of Æsop, as first printed by Caxton in 1484. By JOSEPH JACOBS. (D. Nutt, 1889.)

A NEW edition or a re-issue of Æsop's fables may truly be said to concern all sorts and conditions of men ; for of all books—the Bible itself not excepted—it is probably that with which the great majority of readers have from childhood been most familiar. And the edition before us will suit many tastes. The curious, who love to track and to explore the by-paths of literary history, will find much that is novel and suggestive—if not altogether convincing—in the elaborate preface of Mr. Jacobs, while its light and fluent style will attract the general reader : and indeed to the select of this class the book as a whole is recommended by the inevitable copy of verses from the industrious pen-of-all-work of Mr. Andrew Lang.

In the first place, then, we have a reprint of the fables of Æsop with those of Avian, Alfonso and Poggio as first printed by Caxton in 1484. Though the original Gothic type, which indeed would have been unreadable, has not been imitated, yet to such an extent have the scruples of amateurs in these matters been respected, that the very misprints of Caxton have been religiously preserved. But it is with the prefatory sketch of the history of the Æsopic fable that scholars, and in particular the readers of this review, will chiefly concern themselves ; and to this we now turn.

"Our Æsop is Phædrus with trimmings." This abrupt announcement, with which the preface opens, leads us at once to an important point from which to survey the wide and complicated question before us. For if our Æsop is really Phædrus, whence came Phædrus ? And moreover whence came Avian, whose fables in the middle ages rivalled in popularity those of Phædrus ? That Latin writers had Greek models of some sort in view it is only natural to assume, though, in passing, and in consideration of the original genius of "the last great writer of heathen Rome," we must protest against Mr. Jacobs' sweeping assertion that